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ABSTRACT

An attempt to integrate the career counseling outcome literature (Spokane & Oliver, 1983) indicated that career counseling was definitely beneficial overall. Subsequent updating and additional analyses of the literature confirmed the usefulness of career counseling and led to further findings. Intensity of treatment ("time on task") was found to be a very important variable. Although individual career counseling was considered more effective per unit of time from the perspective of the individual client, group approaches were found to be generally more economical. A lack of standardized measures for many outcomes of interest was revealed, and a particular need for behavioral measures and cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness measures was found. Practitioners are encouraged to assess the outcomes of their career counseling and to follow up clients who appear to have terminated prematurely. This paper reviews the results of this research integration effort and notes some implications of the findings for enhancing career counseling interventions in the areas of diagnosis, treatment, outcome assessment, and follow-up. (Author/NB)

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Enhancing the Effectiveness of Career Counseling Interventions

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Abstract

Our initial attempt to integrate the career counseling outcome literature (Spokane & Oliver, 1983) indicated that career counseling is definitely beneficial overall. Our subsequent updating and additional analyses of that literature (Oliver & Spokane, in press) confirmed that result and led to further findings. Intensity of treatment ("time on task") appears to be a very important variable. Although individual career counseling is more effective per unit of time from the perspective of the individual client, group approaches are generally more economical. We lack standardized measures for many outcomes of interest, and there is particularly a need for behavioral measures and cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness measures. We encourage practitioners to assess the outcomes of their career counseling and to follow up clients who appear to have terminated prematurely.

Enhancing the Effectiveness of Career Counseling Interventions

Several years ago, we plunged with naive zeal into what was then a relatively rare occurrence--integrating a research literature using quantitative methods. More specifically, we reviewed the career counseling outcome literature using the meta-analytic procedures proposed and popularized by Glass and his colleagues (Glass, 1976; Glass, McGaw, & Smith, 1981; Smith, Glass, and Miller, 1980). Our initial foray into a quantitative integration of this literature resulted in limited conclusions (Spokane & Oliver, 1983). We subsequently updated that database and conducted more sophisticated analyses of the expanded set of studies (Oliver & Spokane, in press).

We believe that our research integration efforts have revealed some interesting things about career counseling outcome research. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper will be to review the results of our research integration efforts and to note some implications of our findings for enhancing career counseling interventions.

Summary of Meta-Analysis Findings

Career Counseling is Effective

Our overall results confirmed what others have asserted (e.g., Rounds & Tinsley, 1984): namely, career counseling interventions are generally effective. We found, for example, that the average experimental subject in the 58 studies we reviewed (involving 240 comparisons of experimental and control groups) stood at the 79th percentile of the control group distribution. This figure is altered somewhat if one weights the effect size by the number of subjects in the group or deletes outliers, but clearly people receiving career counseling do better than those who do not.

Little Diagnosis Reported in the Literature

If the research reported in the literature is typical of the career counseling which actually occurs, diagnosis is a neglected step in the process. Some of the studies we reviewed assessed variables such as decision-making stage or level of career maturity. But these assessments tended to be pretests of the outcome measure rather than systematic determinations of where the client was and where the client wanted to be.

One encounters in the literature descriptions of career counseling that assumes that essentially the same outcome is desired by all the participants. However, this is not necessarily the case. Some clients may wish merely to confirm their career choice; others may want to engage in an extensive search for potential career choices.

Type and Intensity of Treatment Important

The one intervention characteristic we found to be very strongly associated with positive career counseling outcomes was intensity of treatment--i.e., number of counseling hours and number of counseling sessions (whose zero-order correlation with each other was .89). This result parallels the frequent finding in education that "time on task" is positively related to extent of learning.

In our studies, however, intensity of treatment was confounded with type of treatment (see Table 1). Classes resulted in the largest effect size (2.05), but they also required the greatest amount of time, averaging 20.89 hours. Individual counseling, with an average effect size of .74, required only 1.42 hours to achieve that outcome. When one looks at the effect per hour, individual counseling is clearly superior (5.21 vs. .98) to class treatments; but the latter are only about half as expensive ($10.87 vs. $20.69 per client in counselor time). The workshop/structured group interventions had an effect per hour of 1.28 yet cost only $2.51. (This result appears to be due to a combination of high average effect size and unusually large groups.)

Outcome Measures Often Inadequate

While some research used standardized measures, most did not. Many researchers apparently did not even attempt to find previously used measures of their outcome variables. Our impression was that many of the measures were not well constructed--no rationale was given for developing a particular instrument with little information provided concerning the source of items, pilot testing, and attempts to ascertain the reliability and validity of the measure. Our career counseling research is clearly hampered by the lack of an armamentarium of valid and reliable instruments.

Although one might expect that standardized instruments would result in smaller effect sizes, this was not necessarily the case. We found 18 studies (34 comparisons) that used one of the several standardized career maturity instruments. These career maturity measures were associated with a substantial effect size (1.05).

Many of the instruments in the literature are self-report in nature. Relatively few are behavioral measures, such as obtaining a job interview or being hired. One behavioral measure, career information seeking, was used quite frequently (in 44 comparisons across 15 studies). Although this type of measure was associated with a modest effect size (.53), the measure tended to be used in relatively short interventions--some less than an hour in length.

Recommendations for Enhancing Career Counseling

Diagnosis

We feel it is important to include diagnosis in the career counseling process. Undoubtedly, most career counselors make at least an implicit diagnosis. But by diagnosis we mean a systematic attempt to clarify explicitly with clients what their goals are and what their present status is with respect to those goals. This is an important step in the counseling process because of the implications it has for type and intensity of treatment, for the measures used to assess the outcome of the counseling, and for client follow-up.

Johnson and Hoese (1988) have recently reported on the development of an instrument to assist practitioners and clients in identifying career counseling concerns. This instrument is a checklist of possible concerns and is intended to serve as a counseling aid. We believe this checklist and other similar measures can be of considerable benefit to the diagnostic process. As we indicated above, clients vary considerably in what they wish to attain from career counseling. And, as Magoon (1980) has noted, clients also vary in the amount of time, expense, and effort they are willing to devote to career concerns.

Treatment

Since intensity of treatment is strongly associated with positive career outcome, it is important for the counselor to plan with the client an intervention that will last long enough to attain the client's goals. Confirmation of a career choice may require less time than exploring a wide range of career possibilities. Clients who do not know themselves well or lack confidence in their abilities may require considerably more counseling time than will a more self-aware and self-confident client.

Practical concerns also enter the picture. It appears that individual counseling leads to positive outcomes more quickly than do other types of career counseling. From the standpoint of the client's time, individual counseling would be most economical. Counseling involving groups (including classes and

structured workshops), however, may be more economical in terms of cost. The preferences of the client must also be taken into account.

Outcome Assessment

It is our belief that all career counselors should assess the outcomes of their counseling using measures more systematic and objective than "gut feel." Assessing outcomes provides necessary feedback to help practitioners enhance their effectiveness. On the basis of our recent research integration effort (Oliver & Spokane, in press), we suggest that counselors use multiple outcome measures. These measures should be linked to the goals of the counseling, as we noted above in the section on diagnosis. If, for example, the client wished to explore a variety of potential careers, a career information-seeking measure might well be in order. We found in the research literature that the career information-seeking measure developed and used in a number of studies by Stanford researchers (e.g., Krumboltz & Schroeder, 1965; Thoresen, Hosford, & Krumboltz, 1970) was a behavioral measure obtained via a structured interview. Although this particular measure is based on client self report, verification checks have demonstrated that the measure is a valid one.

Counselors may find pre-post measures useful for assessing client change. Career choice certainty is an outcome variable that is suitable for pre-post assessment. In two of his books, Crites (1969, p. 139; 1981, p. 25) has included a career choice certainty scale. There are also several standardized career maturity instruments available that are appropriate for pre-post measurement. We strongly encourage the use of standardized measures because "homemade" measures are of doubtful reliability and validity.

In our integration of the career counseling research (Oliver & Spokane, in press), we found very few attempts to assess the cost/benefit or cost/effectiveness of career counseling. We feel there is a real need to construct measures of this type and encourage researchers and practitioners to collaborate in developing such instruments. Particularly in times of constrained resources, one needs a basis to decide how to allocate those resources.

Follow-up.

Closely related to outcome assessment is the follow-up process. While follow-up may mean assessment at a later time of the same outcomes used at the end of the career counseling, it can also mean following up dropouts to determine the reasons for premature termination. Seldom is this reported in the literature, and we agree with Gelso (1979) that it is an

exceedingly important procedure. We suspect that dropping out occurs less frequently in individual career counseling than it does in workshops or other group modes. Again, the literature contains few accounts of efforts to ascertain dropout rates and the reasons for dropping out.

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